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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the effects on college students of a weekly personal growth group and a marathon growth group, both of which are forms of experiential learning focusing on expanded awareness of self and environment, authenticity, and more effective interpersonal communication. The experiential-Gestalt growth group is a relatively unstructured group experience which emphasizes the exploration and expression of here-and-now feelings concerning self and other group members. Focus is put on what "is," on awareness of one's experiencing and interpersonal interactions, and on awareness of ways in which one prevents himself from feeling, moving, and living more fully and honestly. Marathon growth groups, a time extended growth group experience, are a group practicum in intimate, authentic, human interaction to facilitate a transition from self defensive alienation to transparency and psychological intimacy through genuine encounter. The studies support the proposition that the experiential-Gestalt growth group may be an effective method for fostering the process of personal growth and experiential learning in relatively healthy, growth seeking individuals. The growth center model is currently being implemented at Bowling Green State University. (Author/TA)

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# The University Growth Center: A Review of Research Findings

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The growth center model has been advocated by the author (Foulds & Guinan, 1969) for the provision of counseling and psychological services in educational institutions. On the college or university campus, the growth center is a pro-active agency that provides a wide variety of educative, developmental, and remedial services designed to foster increased levels of self-actualization and human effectiveness, expansion of human awareness and human experiencing, and maximum development of human potentials. This model is currently being implemented at Bowling Green State University (Foulds & Guinan, 1970), and the present paper is a review of research and evaluative programs which have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of group approaches to fostering individual growth and personal learning. This paper will be limited to the effects of two types of group activities, the weekly personal growth group and the marathon growth group, forms of experiential learning which focus on expanded awareness of self and environment, authenticity, and more effective interpersonal communication.

## The Process of a Growth Group

All growth groups or encounter groups do not provide the same set of experiences leading to identical results, for group facilitators provide differential stimuli for group members and initiate different forms of group process which may yield differential outcomes. The process herein described is a specific form of group process facilitated by specific leaders whose orientation is experiential-Gestalt.

The experiential-Gestalt growth group (Foulds, 1970b) is a relatively unstructured group experience with emphasis on the exploration and expression of

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here-and-now feelings concerning self and other group members. The facilitator-leader-teacher-person attempts to keep the focus of the group on what "is," on awareness of organismic experiencing and interpersonal interactions, and on awareness of ways in which we prevent ourselves from feeling, moving, and living more fully and honestly. Discussion of historical material or psychological archeology is discouraged, and group members are encouraged to live as fully as possible in the present ongoing situation, to learn to stay in the "continuum of awareness," and to relate authentically in the "now." The facilitator-leader-teacher-person attempts to create a psychological environment of safety and trust in which each person might feel increasingly free to risk being transparently real, to trust his feelings, to communicate his needs and preferences openly and honestly, to be more aware of his personal freedom and the responsibility associated with this, and to be more fully alive and more fully integrated. Participants are urged to "talk straight" at all times (with directness, clarity, and congruence), to become aware of and to "own" their manipulative behaviors (so that these may then change), and to discover ways in which their intended "helpfulness" sometimes inhibits growth and change in another person. They are also encouraged to become increasingly aware of internal sensations and the reflexive muscle movements associated with these (and also of the antagonistic muscle movements which prevent bodily movement and the release of inner tensions), to develop behavioral flexibility (to learn to respond behaviorally to feelings in a variety of ways so that the probability of releasing tension, excess energy, and excitement in an appropriate, nondestructive, and satisfying manner can be increased), and to develop closer contact with the external environment through sharpened sensory awareness. Group members are invited to remove their social masks, to reduce their phony game-playing, and to begin communicating openly, directly, and authentically. At appropriate times the group facilitator-leader-teacher-person uses a variety of techniques including sensory awareness exercises, nonverbal exercises, Gestalt

awareness training, psychodrama, guided fantasy, directed daydreams, and psychomotor experiences to help group members experience more fully in awareness (in the foreground) what had previously been in the background of unawareness. Special emphasis is placed on awareness of one's decision-making process, on the importance of choosing in awareness, and on accepting personal responsibility for one's choices.

## Weekly Growth Groups

Foulds (1970a) investigated changes in scores on the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI; Shostrom, 1966), a measure of self-actualization, following a personal growth group of nine weekly sessions. Subjects were 19 college students who were divided into two subgroups and met for a 4-hour period each week in the evening for nine weeks. The POI was administered before and after the group experience. An equal number of subjects were selected for a nontreatment group controlled for sex and pretest scores on the Inner Direction and Time Competence scales of the POI (all 150 items in the inventory). Experimental group mean scores changed in a positive direction following the growth group experience on all 12 POI scales, and statistically significant changes ($p < .05$) were observed on 8 of 12 scales. Significant changes occurred on the POI scales that purport to assess the following personality characteristics: (a) feelings or attitudes of personal freedom or independence and internal direction based upon inner motivations rather than upon external expectations and influences (Inner Direction); (b) flexibility in the application of values and reduced compulsivity and dogmatism as well as increased ability to situationally or existentially react without blind or rigid adherence to principles (Existentiality); (c) awareness of and sensitivity to one's own needs and feelings (Feeling Reactivity); (d) ability to express feelings in spontaneous action (Spontaneity); (e) acceptance of self in spite of weaknesses and deficiencies (Self-Acceptance); (f) ability to transcend dichotomies and to see opposites in life as meaningfully related (Synergy); (g) ability to accept one's natural aggressiveness (Aggression); and (h) ability to

develop intimate meaningful relationships with other human beings that are unencumbered by expectations and obligations (Capacity for Intimate Contact). No significant changes occurred in mean scores of the control group.

A further examination of the effects of an ongoing growth group on levels of self-actualization was conducted by Foulds (1970c). Fifteen participants met for one 4½-hour period per week for eight weeks and completed the POI at the beginning of the first session and one week following the last session. An equal number of subjects were selected for a nontreatment group controlled for sex and pretest scores on the POI. Findings disclosed that all 12 POI mean scores of the experimental group changed in a positive direction, and significant changes ($p < .05$) occurred on 8 of 12 scales. These were the same eight scales that yielded significant positive changes in mean scores in the previous study (Foulds, 1970a). Since POI scale scores are unlikely to be inflated by the conscious or unconscious attempts of naive subjects to make a good impression (Foulds & Warehime, in press) and are unrelated to social desirability responding (Foulds & Warehime, 1970; Warehime & Foulds, 1970), these findings are especially meaningful. The nontreatment group demonstrated no significant changes.

Foulds (in press) tested the hypothesis that the degree of affect that college students attach to perceptions of themselves and others on semantic differential rating scales would change significantly in a positive direction following a growth group experience of six weekly sessions of four hours each. The experimental group consisted of 14 college students who completed the Affect Scale (Girona, 1969) at the beginning of the first group session and one week following the last session. Findings revealed significant positive changes in mean ratings of Myself ($p < .01$), Others ($p < .05$), and Myself plus Others ($p < .01$) for the experimental group. No significant changes occurred in the mean scores of a nontreatment group controlled for sex and desire to participate in a weekly growth group.

An investigation of the effects of a weekly growth group experience on generalized locus of control expectancies as measured by the Internal-External scale (I-E; Rotter, 1966) was reported by Foulds (in press). The control dimension distributes individuals along a continuum with regard to a generalized expectancy which relates to whether or not the individual possesses or lacks power over what happens to him and to the degree to which he accepts personal responsibility for his behavior and life experiences. The internally oriented individual perceives reinforcements to be contingent upon his own behavior and positive and/or negative events to be consequences of his own actions while the externally oriented individual perceives reinforcements to be unrelated to his own behavior and therefore beyond personal control and personal responsibility. An experimental group of 29 college students were divided into two subgroups and met for one 4½-hour period per week in the evening for eight weeks. As predicted, locus of control expectancies were significantly altered ($p < .001$) in the direction of internality. No significant changes were found for a nontreatment group controlled for sex and pretest scores on the I-E scale.

## Marathon Growth Groups

Since Bach (1966) and Stoller (1967) first introduced Marathon Group Dynamics, the use of marathon group experiences has been frequently publicized but infrequently studied. A marathon is a time-extended growth group experience that may meet for an entire weekend with breaks for sleeping or for a 20 to 30 hour continuous period of time. Bach (1966) has defined the marathon group as a group practicum in intimate, authentic, human interaction which facilitates in the participants a transition from self-defensive alienation and exploitative game-playing to transparency and psychological intimacy through genuine encounter. Following are the results of several marathon group studies that are part of a large scale research program designed to study the effects of personal growth groups.

Guinan and Foulds (1970) reported the results of an investigation of the

effects of a 49-hour weekend marathon group on levels of self-actualization as measured by the POI. The experimental group consisted of 10 college students who completed the POI before and after the weekend marathon. Results revealed that significant positive changes ($p < .05$) occurred in mean scores on 7 of 12 POI scales (Inner Direction; Existentiality; Feeling Reactivity; Spontaneity; Self-Acceptance; Aggression; and Capacity for Intimate Contact) for the experimental group. There were no significant changes for a nontreatment control group.

Foulds, Girona, and Guinan (in press) investigated the effects of a 24-hour marathon growth group on the degree of affect that individuals attach to perceptions of themselves and others. Sixteen college students responded to semantic differential rating scales (Affect Scale) measuring attitudes toward self and others before and one week following the marathon group experience. An equal number of subjects controlled for sex, age, and desire to participate in a marathon group formed a nontreatment control group. Results disclosed significant positive changes in mean ratings of Myself ($p < .001$), Others ($p < .005$), and Myself plus Others ($p < .001$) for the experimental group. Of the 16 subjects, 14 ratings of Myself, 13 of Others, and 15 of Myself plus Others showed change in a positive direction on posttests. Changes in control group mean scores were nonsignificant.

Foulds, Guinan, and Warehime (1970a) studied changes in generalized locus of control expectancies as measured by the I-E scale as a result of a 24-hour marathon group. The experimental group consisted of 15 college students who completed the I-E scale before and one week following a 24-hour marathon group. A nontreatment group controlled for sex, age, and desire to participate in a marathon group also completed the I-E scale two times, a week apart. Findings revealed that locus of control expectancies were significantly altered ($p < .01$) in the direction of increased internality. No significant changes occurred in the nontreatment control group.

Foulds, Guinan, and Warehime (1970b) investigated the effects of a marathon group on scores on the Dogmatism Scale (DS; Rokeach, 1960). The DS consists of 40 items that measure individual differences in openness or closedness of belief systems. Rokeach suggests that a high score on the DS indicates a closed way of thinking, an authoritarian outlook on life, an intolerance toward those with opposing beliefs, and a sufferance with those with similar beliefs. Fifteen experimental subjects completed the DS before and one week following a 24-hour marathon growth group, and results indicated that a significant positive change ($p < .01$) occurred in the mean score of participants in the direction of open beliefs. No significant changes were found for a nontreatment group controlled for sex, age, and desire to participate in a 24-hour marathon group.

A six month follow-up study was conducted by Foulds, Wright, and Guinan (in press) to determine the self-reports of 15 college students who had participated in a 24-hour marathon group with regard to their perceptions of the value and impact of the group experience upon their lives. Six months following the marathon group each subject had an individual semi-structured personal interview with one of the authors who was unknown to the subjects, and these 30-45 minute interviews were tape-recorded for later analysis. The interviews were centered around 13 questions, and the interviewer encouraged as much free response as possible and then reflected these responses to encourage deeper self-exploration and to ensure more valid information. Findings revealed that the self-reports were extremely positive with regard to the perceived value of the group experience. The subjects saw the group as a highly valuable personal growth and learning experience, and they described specific overt behavior changes to demonstrate this growth and learning. The kinds of change reported by the subjects included increased awareness of and contact with inner feelings, greater spontaneity, a tendency to live more fully in the here-and-now, greater openness and honesty, increased feelings of self-confidence and trust in self and others, greater

acceptance of self and others, and increased feelings of empathy for and identification with other human beings. All subjects reported positive changes in the ways they view and feel about themselves, in level of overall personal functioning, and in the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

## Summary

The studies reviewed in this paper support the proposition that the experiential-Gestalt growth group may be an effective method for fostering the process of personal growth and experiential learning in relatively healthy, growth-seeking individuals. The emerging gestalt containing both objective and subjective criteria regarding the effects of this form of group process indicates that participants seem to change in the following ways: (a) a tendency to live more fully in the here-and-now; (b) increased feelings of self-support and inner direction; (c) more open belief systems; (d) increased empathy for and broader identification with other human beings; (e) closer contact with one's own needs and feelings and greater spontaneity in expressing feelings; (f) increased self-acceptance; (g) a tendency to be synergistic and to see opposites in life as meaningfully related; (h) increased awareness and acceptance of one's natural aggressiveness; (i) ability to establish intimate relationships with other persons; (j) more positive views of self and others; (k) increased feelings of personal control and personal responsibility; (l) greater openness and honesty; (m) increased self-confidence; (n) greater trust in self and others; (o) increased personal effectiveness; and (p) improved interpersonal relationships. Both the weekly and the marathon growth group seem to foster similar kinds of psychological growth and change.

The problem of assessing outcome is a complex one, indeed, and the possibilities for generalization of results are limited. Since the precise causes of the observed positive changes reported here are open to speculation, future research efforts should attempt to manipulate the independent variables of differential time-structures, group facilitators, and forms of treatment in order to

isolate and determine those factors which are reliably associated with constructive personality and behavior change of group members. Also, measurements or ratings of actual out-of-group behaviors may be a more valid procedure than assessing the self-report which is a subjective criterion that may contain possible conscious or unconscious distortions. Continued observation of the postgroup behavior of group members by persons not involved in the group experience would be helpful in assessing the transfer of learning to real life situations, the long term effects of growth groups, and permanent changes in overall level of adjustment. We must also begin to study individual cases within a group (rather than simply the group mean) if we are to unravel the many knots that block our understanding of the effects of group phenomena and if we are to discover individual differences that are predictive of positive outcome of group experience.

The integrated person is organismically balanced and has the capacity to experience intellectually, emotionally, and sensorially. The goal of the experiential-Gestalt growth group experience is to foster more whole, fully integrated, real, and authentic persons who are willing to accept themselves and to take responsibility for their lives. The research findings herein reviewed suggest that this approach may effectively facilitate the self-actualization and psychological development of normal college students.

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